The background of the poster features a large, gnarled tree with a prominent trunk and many branches. A nest is visible on one of the branches, and two small, light-colored birds are perched on the branches around the nest. The sky behind the tree is a deep, clear blue.

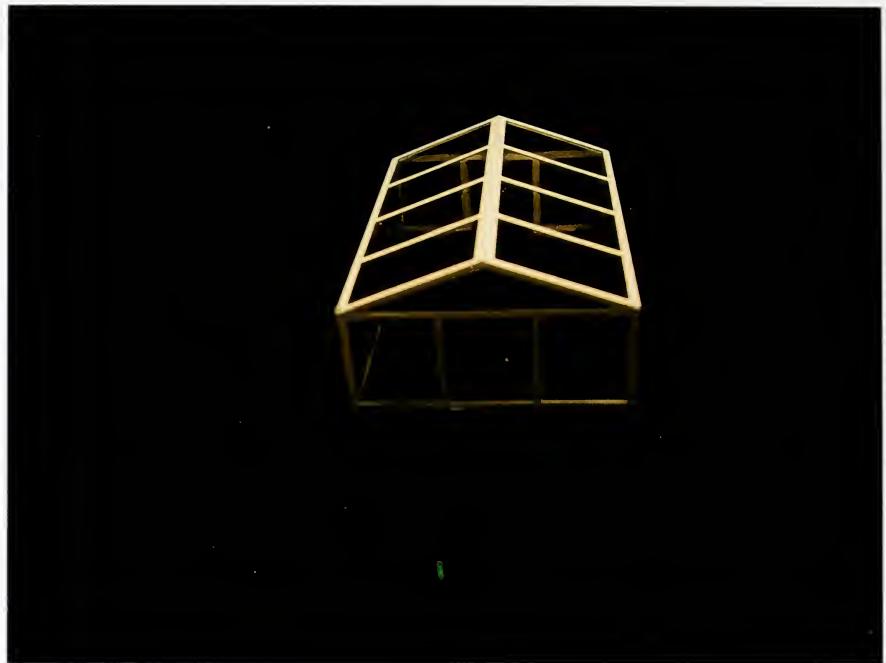
MIRANDA
LICHENSTEIN

**SANCTUARY
FOR A
WILD CHILD**

July 13–September 21, 2001

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris



"I GREW UP IN THE CITY, AND ANYTHING NATUREY FEELS TERRIFYING. IN A WAY, MY WORK IS AN INVESTIGATION OF MY OWN FEAR."¹
—MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN

SANC•TU•AR•Y, n.

- 1.A. A SACRED PLACE, SUCH AS A CHURCH, TEMPLE, OR MOSQUE.
- 2.A. A SACRED PLACE...IN WHICH FUGITIVES FORMERLY WERE IMMUNE TO ARREST.
3. A PLACE OF REFUGE OR ASYLUM.
4. A RESERVED AREA IN WHICH BIRDS AND OTHER ANIMALS, ESPECIALLY WILD ANIMALS, ARE PROTECTED FROM HUNTING OR MOLESTATION.

—THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, 3RD ED., 1992

Defining distinct areas of sanctuary and, by inference, places of fear, is a basic instinct of human and animal society. The desire to create areas of inclusion and exclusion in human society also extends to more abstract arenas, such as defining “normal” behavior or acceptable emotions. Twentieth-century anthropologists have studied the ways in which this effort to delineate safety and threat has produced fundamental beliefs and practices, manifest in religious narratives, rites of passage, social mores, and even racism and sexism.

Miranda Lichtenstein’s work explores the ambiguous arenas of sanctuary and fear through subjects ranging from male exhibitionists to suburban houses and byways in Connecticut. Though photography is her primary medium, her new installation at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, entitled *Sanctuary for a Wild Child*, consists of a series of drawings and related DVD projections. Inspired by cross-cultural legends of children brought up in the wild, the works are displayed as an installation set within an architectural configuration designed to create a dynamic process of exploration for the viewer.

The term “Wild Child” refers to a child who grew up without any contact with civilization. Such children are described in apocryphal and historical accounts as troubling the line between nature and culture. Lichtenstein first began using the Wild Child in her work in 1997, intrigued by her discovery of the story



the Karpfen bear-girl

of Genie, who was found in 1970 imprisoned in a tiny room, where she had spent eleven of her thirteen years. The book and film chronicling the acculturation of Genie led Lichtenstein to other well-documented case studies of Wild Children—Kaspar Hauser, for example, who appeared as a young man in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1828 exhibiting no signs of having ever interacted with society; Victor, the eighteenth-century “Wild Boy of Aveyron,” discovered living in the woods in France (the subject of François Truffaut’s 1969 film, *L’Enfant Sauvage*); and Wild Peter, discovered in Germany in 1724 as a young boy of about twelve years. J.A.L. Singh and Robert M. Zingg’s 1942 publication *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* presented an anthropological collection of more than forty such case histories, mostly from Europe and Asia and dating from the fourteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Singh and Zingg included cases involving extreme isolation from society, as well as those involving children who were thought to have been raised by animals, such as the Wolf Children of Midnapore, discovered in India in the 1920s. Each account led Lichtenstein to others, from the legendary child-founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ fictitious Tarzan, to academic studies of “feral children” by recent social scientists.

Less interested in the accuracy of these accounts than in their persistent recurrence across time and culture, Lichtenstein sought to explore the common elements of the Wild Child narratives. Shepherded by their “civilized” discoverers, these children were thought to present a picture of humanity in its natural state, undefiled by culture. As such, they provided the perfect experimental subjects for early social scientists. In the more thorough case studies, the child is carefully scrutinized for its purity as well as for its savagery. A meticulous documentation of the process of civilization then follows, narrating the child’s difficult (and sometimes unsuccessful) acquisition of speech and of cultural values such as morality or social responsibility. The popularity of these accounts, whether presented as case studies or through fictionalized narrations and oral mythology, seems rooted in a universal need to express the idea of an Other, who exists outside the boundaries of society and symbolizes the repressed, taboo, and threatening emotions and actions excluded from daily existence.

Sanctuary for a Wild Child presents a series of drawings Lichtenstein made of these children, inspired by her historical research. In the drawings, she willfully alters aspects of the characters, changing their features and period dress and using fairly generic representations of young children and babies. This approach calls attention to the interchangeability of the narrative accounts, though drawn from times and locales as disparate as twelfth-century Europe and twentieth-century India. Lichtenstein retains the typically colorful names by which each child was known, as if labeling each image for categorization (i.e., the Karpfen bear-girl, Tomko of Zips, the Champagne feral-girl, and the first, second, and third Lithuanian bear-child). With the name written along the bottom of each drawing under the child’s image, they recall poster children—usually the sick or disabled, runaways, or victims of kidnapping—which adds an element of vulnerability to the works. The result is a kind of systematic cataloguing, in which the artist builds a typology of the Wild Children and evokes the narrative of their socialization.

In the Whitney exhibition, Lichtenstein has configured the drawings within an installation designed to draw on the viewer’s physical experience of the space. Entering the darkened gallery, we are confronted with a blank, curved white wall, behind which vividly hued wall projections are partially visible. The curve

of the wall guides our movement around what is revealed to be a round, roofed enclosure. We then enter the low-ceilinged room to find the series of Wild Child drawings ringing the interior wall. The intimately scaled Wild Child images float on expanses of white paper and require us to move around the perimeter of the small space to see them fully, an action which underscores the sense of enclosure. The room itself is reminiscent of a burrow, a wild thing's sanctuary space that is at once reverent and protective as well as confining.

The second element of the installation is based on the photographic series that grew out of the drawings and explores the broader ideas of environment and protection. About twenty photographs are included in the Whitney installation, displayed as large-scale DVD projections on the far wall of the gallery. Each projection fades silently into the next, creating a hushed, dreamlike atmosphere. The photographs are of environments Lichtenstein built in her studio—burrows, model houses, and homemade dwellings constructed out of toothpicks and paper—that are meant to reflect the inner fantasies of the Wild Child. They are fragments of imagination and memory culled from incidental scenes and occurrences in each Wild Child account, such as the plantlike shape of the iron fence that kept Kaspar Hauser shut in from the outside world, an oddly cropped view of a tree branch seen as if from an enclosure below, or the familiar shadow of one child's maternal gazelle. Most prominent among these avatars is the artist's conception of the children's desire for shelter and sense of place, further established by the poetic titles of each projected photograph: *In some un-heard of country*, *Somewhere between here and there*, *Elsewhere*, and *Lost beyond telling*. In the projections, Lichtenstein often uses bright colors as backdrops to heighten the fictional content of the photographs and establish them in an imagined world. The





FROM FAR LEFT TO RIGHT: *Somewhere between here and there*, 2000–01; *the Karpfen bear-girl*, 1997–98; *Legend*, 2000–01; *Lost beyond telling*, 2000–01

children's lack of language, once thought to be one of the four criteria that distinguish animals from humans, prompted the artist to explore how a visual referent to a speechless child's memory could be made manifest in a landscape. For this reason, the photographs, unlike the strictly representational drawings, range from mysteriously suggestive to completely abstract.

Though the sequencing of images suggests the linear, temporal development of a film, the images, even when recognizable, do not resolve into a coherent story line. What connects these photographs to a concept of narrative is their relationship to the drawings. The names of the Wild Children on the drawings anchor the viewer by proposing a story that is concrete, but can never really be articulated, because their stories are to some extent *about* the absence of language. Likewise, the photographic images of a Wild Child's thoughts are semi-abstract and evocative rather than descriptive. Like other contemporary photographers, such as James Casebere and Gregory Crewdson, Lichtenstein constructs a physical world that exists only for the photograph and treats the photographic process like a traditional painting—as a window onto illusionistic space. The scale of the projection (10 by 15 feet) reinforces the perception of the image as a view or entryway into an alternate reality. However, the space that is created is less a specific landscape—the subject of many of Lichtenstein's photographic images—than a dreamscape, one that expands the element of fantasy persistent throughout all of her work.

The play of light and saturated hues in the photographs recall Lichtenstein's previous work, notably the *Danbury Road* and *Lovers' Lane* series of nocturnal "found environments" in the Connecticut suburbs. *Lovers' Lane* exposes the sites of escape, illicit romance, and transgressions of suburban teenagers, who likely occupy houses similar to the ones Lichtenstein photographs in *Danbury Road*. The lurid, otherworldly colors and harsh, cold light transform the familiar into the fearsome and surreal. Yet many of the images are ambivalent; the sharp, romantic beauty of the landscapes also conveys a sense of desire, the outsider's view of the inside. Lichtenstein casts herself in the role of the voyeur, the predatory Other whose intentions are unclear and outside the realm of socially acceptable conduct. In *Sanctuary*, however, she reverses the roles of subject and viewer. The viewer becomes the intruder into the Other's safe space—both the physical space of the burrow and the psychological space of the projections. The chilly, formal restraint of the earlier series is softened in the *Sanctuary* images, allowing for a sense of intimacy. Lichtenstein captures and reinterprets two societal extremes: suburban families, often presented as the paradigm of socialized acceptability, and the Wild Child, as far outside that world as



The color of distance, 2000–01

can be imagined, assumed to desire the former's questionable normality and safety. Throughout her work, Lichtenstein consistently questions the social context of things hidden and unknown, uncovering and illuminating cultural fear that is normally pushed into the shadows.

Lichtenstein's photographs have been linked both formally and conceptually to nineteenth-century Romanticism, whose practitioners took a stand against the Enlightenment exultation of reason in favor of subjective, emotional experience. Though Enlightenment rationalists saw nature as the ultimate source of Reason, the Romantics believed in a "return to nature" for its wild, unrestricted, and capricious qualities, which they perceived as transcendent. Surrounded by this natural atmosphere, a person could achieve a psychological state that broke free of the overly rigid, rule-driven consciousness of the "civilized" to underlying universal truths. The vast landscapes characteristic of Romantic painting underscored these qualities, for they typically included a lone human presence as a heroic individual, forging into the wild unknown in search of the sublime. The references to Romanticism in Lichtenstein's photographic series—in which she herself occupies the explorer's role—are highly self-conscious, even bordering on the ironic.

Sanctuary, in turn, questions the idea of humans embodying that natural, sublime state, evoked by the more earnest, intimate projections. Lichtenstein avoids the simplistic trope of the "noble savage," however, by suggesting a critique of the Enlightenment rationalist approach to nature. The attempt to categorize and typify the Wild Child in her drawings plays off the belief in reason and science as a means to eliminate fear, to render the unknown impotent through fact. Whether this very contemporary belief in scientific knowledge may itself be a kind of subjective sublime is left to the viewer to decide.

Lichtenstein proposes no absolute conclusions in the *Sanctuary* series; rather, she encourages the viewer to look beyond the rigid divisions and assumptions so common to human existence. The projections become a screen onto which viewers project their interpretations of the Wild Child's desires as they navigate the space, literal and metaphorical, between the two sets of images. The Wild Child can be seen to occupy a realm between nature and culture, mythology and science, instinct and language. Lichtenstein affirms the position of the Wild Child in this liminal space as a personification of the gray area that complicates clear, simple dichotomies.

—Shamim M. Momin

Note

1 Quoted in Kara Jesella, "American Gothic," *Nylon* (September 2000), p. 62.

MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN

Born in New York City, 1969

Lives and works in New York City

California Institute of the Arts, Valencia
(MFA, 1993)

Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York
(BA, 1990)

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago,
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (1989)

SELECTED ONE-ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

1992

"Portraits," California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia

1993

"Home Beauty Improvements (MFA Thesis Show)," Mint Gallery, California
Institute of the Arts, Valencia

1997

"Wild Child," Three Day Weekend,
Los Angeles

1998

"Danbury Road," Steffany Martz, New York

1999

"New Work," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

2000

"Lovers Lane," Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles

2001

"Photographs from the Series Lovers' Lane,"
Leslie Tonkonow Artworks & Projects,
New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1995

"Alter Image," 450 Broadway Gallery,
New York

"Page 13," 450 Broadway Gallery, New York

1996

"The Weather Channel," Art Initiatives,
New York

"Framed," Belgarde Gallery 149, New York

1998

"Science," Feature Inc., New York
"Spectacular Optical," Thread Waxing Space,
New York

1999

"Playing Off Time," The Aldrich Museum
of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield,
Connecticut
"Group Show," Steffany Martz, New York
"Friends and Neighbors: Residential
Structure and Sentiment in Recent
Drawings and Photographs," Three Day
Weekend, Los Angeles
"Recipes," Zing Magazine, New York

2000

"Monster," Gracie Mansion Gallery,
New York
"Dusk," I-20, New York
"Group Show," Leslie Tonkonow Artworks &
Projects, New York
"Picturing Architecture: From Space to
Place," Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, SUNY
College at Old Westbury, New York

2001

"World Without Ground: Seven New York
Artists," Chase/Freedman Gallery,
Hartford, Connecticut
"Song Poems," Cohan Leslie and Browne,
New York
"Fresh: The Altoids® Curiously Strong
Collection 1998–2000," New Museum of
Contemporary Art, New York
"Painting/Not Painting," White Columns,
New York

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COVER: *Elsewhere*, 2000–01

All works illustrated are part of:
Miranda Lichtenstein, *Sanctuary for a Wild Child*, 2000–01.
DVD projection and ink, graphite, and gouache on paper,
dimensions variable. Collection of the artist

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